

Florin Japanese American Citizens League
Oral History Project
California Civil Liberties Public Education Program Grant

Oral History Interview

with

Ruth Asawa Lanier

April 7, 2000
San Francisco, California

By Joanne Iritani

Copyright held by
the Florin Japanese American Citizens League
and California State University, Sacramento
Sacramento, California
Photocopy is limited to a maximum of 20 pages per volume

Florin JACL Oral History Project

Japanese American Citizens League, Florin Chapter

California Civil Liberties Public Education Program Grant

MISSION STATEMENT

To collect and preserve the historical record of the multigenerational experience of Japanese Americans and others who befriended them. The books produced will enhance the California State University, Sacramento/Japanese American Archival Collection (CSUS/JAAC) housed in the CSUS Archives for study, research, teaching and exhibition. This unique collection of life histories provides a permanent resource for the use of American and international scholars, researchers and faculty, as well as a lesson for future generations to appreciate the process of protecting and preserving the United States Constitution and America's democratic principles.

PREFACE

The Florin JACL Oral History Project provides completed books and tapes of Oral Histories presented to the interviewed subjects, to the California State University, Sacramento/Japanese American Archival Collection (CSUS/JAAC), and to the Florin JACL Chapter. Copyright is held by the Florin JACL Chapter and California State University, Sacramento. Photocopying is limited to a maximum of 20 pages per volume.

This project will continue the mission of the Florin JACL Oral History Project which began in 1987 and recognized the necessity of interviewing Japanese Americans: "We have conducted these interviews with feelings of urgency. If we are to come away with lessons from this historic tragedy, we must listen to and become acquainted with the people who were there. Many of these historians are in their seventies, eighties and nineties. We are grateful that they were willing to share their experiences and to answer our questions with openness and thoughtfulness." This same urgency to conduct interviews was felt by the North Central Valley JACL Chapters of French Camp, Lodi, Placer County, and Stockton in 1997-98 as a consortium joining the Florin Chapter in obtaining funding from the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund (CLPEF). And now, again under the Florin Chapter banner, more life histories will be told with the generous funding from the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program (CCLPEP).

The Oral Histories in the Japanese American Archival Collection relate the personal stories of the events surrounding the exclusion, forced removal and internment of American citizens and permanent resident aliens of Japanese ancestry. There is a wide variety of interviews of former internees, military personnel, people who befriended the Japanese Americans, Caucasians who worked in the internment camps and others, whose stories will serve to inform the public of the fundamental injustice of the government's action in the detention of the Japanese aliens and "non-aliens" (the government's designation of U.S. citizens), so that the causes and circumstances of this and similar events may be illuminated and understood.

The population of those who lived through the World War II years is rapidly diminishing, and in a few years, will altogether vanish. Their stories must be preserved for the historians and researchers today and in the future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PHOTOS

INTERVIEW HISTORY	i
BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY	ii
ARTIST'S STATEMENT	iii
RUTH ASAWA LANIER: 1926 - PRESENT	v
Courtesy of Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak St., Oakland, CA	
MAP OF SAN FRANCISCO COMMISSIONS OF RUTH ASAWA	x

Session 1, April 7, 2000

[Tape 1, Side A]	1
Parents--Father's history--Asano clan--Immigration of parents--Mother's history--Siblings--Childhood in Norwalk, California--Farming--Japanese language school--Education--	
[Tape 1, Side B]	14
Independent nature--Farm work--Pearl Harbor--A wonderful principal--Santa Anita Assembly Center--Art experiences--Childhood activities--Father arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation--Sisters' experiences in Japan--	
[Tape 2, Side A]	27
Sister was in Japan during wartime--Experiences in Santa Anita--Life in a stable--Move to Rohwer Relocation Center--Meal time in Rohwer--Art classes conducted by internees who had worked at the Disney Studios--Discomfort of being near the work by others on the camouflage nets--Graduated from high school in Rohwer--Attended Milwaukee State Teacher's College--Attended Black Mountain College, North Carolina--Summer at the University of Mexico--Parents and siblings returned to Norwalk--Married William Lanier in San Francisco in 1949--	
[Tape 2, Side B]	43
Ideas for art obtained at Black Mountain College--Experimenting with new materials, designs, methods--Creating many public art works--Children and their families and work--description of public works in San Francisco--Explanation of works in her studio--Activities with children and schools--	
[Tape 3, Side A]	55
Illness with lupus--Need for care in her movements--DeYoung Museum project--Explanation of hanging wire sculptures--Being intrigued by new ideas and use of new materials--Involving Bay Area children in the DeYoung Museum project--	
APPENDIX	62

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER

Joanne Iritani is a member of the Florin Japanese American Citizens League and is a past president. She is active in the United Methodist Church and United Methodist Women.

Joanne, a Poston Camp Internee, is a retired special education teacher with a master's degree from California State University, Bakersfield.

She and her husband Frank are authors of *Ten Visits Revised*, which is a guidebook to the ten Japanese American relocation centers.

INTERVIEW TIME AND PLACE

April 7, 2000

The interview was conducted in the studio at the home of Ruth Asawa Lanier in San Francisco.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs were taken by Joanne Iritani.

TYPING AND EDITING

Joanne Iritani transcribed the manuscript. Editing was done by Ruth Asawa Lanier.

TAPES AND INTERVIEW RECORDS

Copies of the bound transcript and the original tapes will be kept by Florin JACL and in the University Archives Library, California State University, Sacramento, 2000 State University Drive East, Sacramento California, 95819.

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Ruth Asawa Lanier was born in 1926 in Norwalk, California to Umakichi and Haru Yasuda Asawa. Her father had emigrated in 1902 from Fukushima Prefecture, Japan with his brother, first to Hawaii and later to California. Ruth's mother came as a picture bride around 1919. Her parents leased and farmed property in the Norwalk area of Orange County.

Five girls and two boys were born and attended Norwalk Grammar School and Excelsior Union High School. The family was among many Japanese truck farmers in the area with all the children working on the farm after school. During harvest time, the days were long preparing the vegetables for market. Her mother awoke at three, her father at four and the children at five or six.

The children also attended the Japanese language school on Saturday. Her father was one of the leaders of the language school. Ruth spoke of her independent nature as a child and recalled the art and cultural experiences of her childhood as a delightful time of learning.

World War II began when Ruth was a junior in high school. She recalled the wonderful principal who held a school assembly to explain to the student body that the children of the Japanese Issei must be held blameless for the war. In February, her father was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Perhaps it was for his role as a leader in the community. The family was taken in May to Santa Anita racetrack where they lived in a stable, and later to Rohwer, Arkansas. While at Santa Anita, Ruth was able to take art classes from volunteer Nisei teachers who had worked at the Disney Studios.

After graduating from high school in Rohwer, Ruth left to attend Milwaukee State Teacher's College and later transferred to the experimental school, Black Mountain College in North Carolina where she had wonderful teachers and classmates, and developed her creative feel for her art. "I had a wonderful environment for learning to be bold. To be unafraid. Unafraid of failure, whatever it was."

Ruth met William Albert Lanier at Black Mountain college and in 1948, they were married in San Francisco where William worked for an architectural firm. The anti-miscegenation law had been rescinded and they did not go to Reno as they had planned.

Ruth has a studio in her home and their six children live in the neighborhood. Ruth's art work and exhibits are listed on the following abbreviated biography. Her creativity, her love and dedication to her art and to children is apparent in the many and varied works in her studio and in her explanations of working with the children at her neighborhood school.

Her health has seen some difficulties, but her mind is sharp and her enthusiasm is wonderful. Ruth is a great role model for all people, not just artists.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I was born in Norwalk, California, on a truck farm three years before the stock market crash of 1929. I grew up during the great depression. My mother, Haru, and my father, Umakichi, worked hard, growing four sets of crops related to the four seasons. We prepared for summer crops during the winter, constantly working, planting, harvesting and having faith in nature, the source of our livelihood and the center of our lives. Really I had two lives--one as a schoolgirl, and the other as a farm worker working in the fields with my family.

I can see glimpses of my childhood in my work. We used to make patterns in the dirt, hanging our feet off the horse-drawn farm equipment. We made endless hourglass figures that I now see as the forms within forms in my crocheted wire sculptures. The seemingly endless patterns we made in the dust, the shapes of the flowers and the vegetation, the translucence of a dragonfly's wing when sunlight pours through it--these things have influenced my work. I see and feel the influences of my earliest years in my work today.

My art training was in drawing, painting, color, and design, but my career has been in sculpture and working in the schools. My teachers at Black Mountain College were practicing artists, including Josef Albers, Illya Bolotowsky, and Buckminster Fuller. They taught me that there is no separation between studying, performing the daily chores of living, and creating one's own work. Through them I came to understand the total commitment required to be an artist.

In 1949, I left North Carolina and Black Mountain College and moved to San Francisco, where I began my career as an artist, wife and mother. Most of my early work is in wire, crocheted and tied, but I have also always drawn and painted. As my children went to school, I was disturbed by the lack of meaningful arts programs in the public schools, and so I co-founded the Alvarado Arts Workshop with art historian Sally Woodbridge and other artist/parents. The guiding philosophy was to bring practicing artists (craftspersons, actors, mimes, muralists, musicians, gardeners, and dancers) into the school to teach on a contractual basis. Currently, we have a full-time artist with a studio in an elementary school. Artists should play an integral role in the communities where they live. It is important to reach children at a very young age. I have worked in the schools as a parent, artist, and community volunteer for the past 45 years.

My public commissions, such as the Mermaid Fountain at Ghirardelli Square (1968) and the Hyatt Fountain at Union Square (1973), grew out of the work I was doing with children in the public schools. I was working with materials that were readily accessible, affordable, and safe, such as dough, paper and recycled materials. Through my public commissions, I was able to take those experimental materials and translate them into permanent works in bronze, cast concrete, and stainless steel. New ideas came from including other artists, children and "non-artists" in these public works.

As a mother and grandmother, I expected my six children and ten grandchildren to participate in the making of art as well as washing the dishes, taking the garbage out, weeding the garden, and building things. They have helped me on commissions and continue today to work with me on projects. Although most of them do not earn their living as artists, their lives have been made far richer because of this involvement. I believe in the lasting joy that making art can bring to all of us.

Ruth Asawa
August 14, 2001, San Francisco

(This Artist's Statement by Ruth Asawa was printed in the brochure accompanying the Oakland Museum of California showing, "Ruth Asawa: completing the circle", June 15 - September 22, 2002. Permission to use was received from Ruth Asawa Lanier.)

RUTH ASAWA LANIER

1926 - present

- 1926 Ruth Asawa is born in Norwalk, California to Umakichi and Haru Asawa. She is the fourth of their seven children. Asawa grows up during the Great Depression on a truck farm leased by her family where she learns the meaning of hard work. Despite year-round demands, Asawa finds time to draw.
- 1939 Asawa wins a school competition for her drawing of the Statue of Liberty, representing what it means to be an American.
- 1941 Asawa is 15 years old when Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor launches American involvement in World War II.
- 1942 Japanese Americans suffer greatly during World War II. In Asawa's family, her father, a leader of the local Japanese community, is arrested and sent to New Mexico, where he is detained for two years. Asawa, her mother, brothers and sisters are forced to move to the Santa Anita Racetrack for temporary detention where they are housed in horse stables. There Asawa meets other internees who are artists. Landscape artist Tom Okamoto teaches Asawa, and they draw for as much as five hours a day. After six months, the Asawas are transferred to the Rohwer Relocation Center in Arkansas. She is able to continue her drawing and engages in other activities such as music and sports.
- 1943 Asawa graduates from high school at the Rohwer Relocation Center, then enters Milwaukee State Teachers College. However, she is unable to serve as a student teacher due to wartime sentiments and thus cannot complete degree requirements.
- 1945 Asawa spends the summer in Mexico City with her sister Lois at the Universidad de Mexico.
- 1946 After her disappointing experience in Milwaukee, Asawa is accepted to Black Mountain College in North Carolina for a summer. At summer's end, she is offered a scholarship, and she stays. She has the opportunity to study with the artist Josef Albers and is deeply influenced by his teaching. Another influential teacher is the revolutionary thinker Buckminster Fuller, who remains a friend of Asawa and her family for the rest of his life.

- 1948 At Black Mountain College, Asawa begins experimenting with forms crocheted from wire, her fingers are her tools.
- 1949 Asawa marries fellow student Albert Lanier in their fragrant loft above an onion warehouse. They move to San Francisco, where Lanier begins his practice as an architect.
- 1950 One of Asawa's crocheted wire pieces is exhibited in the San Francisco Art Association Annual at the San Francisco Museum of Art. There is some question about whether or not the work is sculpture.

Son Xavier and daughter Aiko are born.

- 1952 Son Hudson is born.
- 1953 Asawa exhibits her work with Jean Varda, who had taught a summer session at Black Mountain College, at the Tin Angel nightclub in San Francisco. Asawa also has a solo exhibition at Design Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1954 Asawa is part of a four-person exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art (with Ida Dean, Merry Renk and Marguerite Wildenhain). A solo show at the Peridot Gallery in New York City is reviewed in *Time* magazine.
- 1955 Asawa is invited to exhibit at the Sao Paulo (Brazil) Bienal.
- 1956 An Asawa sculpture is purchased for the collection of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. Asawa has a second show at Peridot Gallery. Other shows include the University of Illinois Biennial and the *American Exhibition* at the Art Institute of Chicago where her work appears on the catalog cover.

Son Adam is born.

- 1958 Asawa is part of another group exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City. The Oakland Museum purchases one the Asawa's works.

Daughter Addie is born.

- 1959 Asawa's work appears in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Son Paul is born.

- 1960 Asawa begins to receive many commissions for public art in San Francisco, including Ghirardelli Square, Joseph Magnin department store, and Fox Plaza.

An exhibition of Asawa's sculpture and drawings opens at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum.

- 1961 Asawa, with help from her children carves the nine by five foot double doors marking the entry to their home.

- 1962 Asawa begins her experiments with tied-wire sculpture.

- 1963 Asawa harnesses the techniques of electroplating and hot-dipped galvanizing for use in her work.

- 1965 Asawa receives the Tamarind Lithography Workshop Fellowship (Los Angeles) and produces 52 lithographs. She is also featured in a solo exhibition at the Pasadena Museum of Art.

- 1968 Asawa completes the commissioned cast bronze fountain entitled *Andrea* for Ghirardelli Square.

With Sally Woodbridge, Asawa co-founds the Alvarado School Arts Workshop, which eventually becomes an artist-in-residence program in 50 San Francisco public schools through C.E.T.A. (the Comprehensive Employment Training Act).

Asawa is the recipient of the first Dymaxion Award for an Artist/Scientist.

Asawa served two four -year terms on the San Francisco Art Commission.

- 1971 To create a sample panel for the proposed Grand Hyatt Hotel fountain at San Francisco's Union Square, Asawa makes a model in dough. The dough model is then cast in bronze.

- 1973 Asawa's fountain at the Grand Hyatt Hotel is completed.
 - 1974 Asawa received an Honorary Doctorate from the California College of Arts and Crafts and the Fine Arts Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects.
 - 1974 Asawa is appointed to President Jimmy Carter's Commission on Mental Health and serves on a committee studying "The Role of the Arts." She also becomes a member of the National Council, National Endowment for the Arts Task Force, Education and Training of Artists.
 - 1975 The Oakland Museum Women's Board purchases a tied-wire sculpture for the exterior of the museum.
 - 1976 Asawa makes two fountains inspired by origami for Buchanan Mall in San Francisco's Japantown.
- Governor Jerry appoints Asawa to the California Arts Council for a two-year term.
- 1980 Asawa serves on the National Endowment for the Arts, National Crafts Planning Project.
 - 1982 February 12th is declare Ruth Asawa Day by the City and County of San Francisco.
- Asawa, friends and family create gigantic heads of celebrities for Macy's Annual Easter Flower Show, "Faces of San Francisco."
- 1984 Asawa completes the bas-relief *San Francisco Yesterday and Today* at the Ramada Renaissance Hotel (now the Renaissance Park 55 Hotel).
 - 1986 Bayside Plaza on the Embarcadero installs a stainless steel fountain by Asawa. Its form draws upon origami and other folded paper experiments.
 - 1988 Beringer Winery, St. Helena, California, installs a bronze fountain made by Asawa.
 - 1989 The Asian Heritage Council presents its Arts Award to Asawa. She also begins eight years of service on the Board of Trustees, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

- 1990 The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce presents their Cyril Magnin Award to Asawa.
- 1993 Asawa receives an Honor Award from the Women's Caucus for the Arts.
- 1994 Asawa completes the Japanese American Internment Memorial Sculpture for the Federal Building in the city of San Jose.
- 1995 Asawa receives the Asian American Arts Foundation's Golden Ring Lifetime Achievement Award.
- 1996 Asawa is recognized a Distinguished Urban Artist by San Francisco State University Creative Arts Department.
- 1997 Asawa receives an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the San Francisco Art Institute.
- 1998 Francisco State University presents Asawa with an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts. She also receives a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Milwaukee State Teachers College where she had been unable to complete requirements for the degree in the early 1940s due to World War II.
- 2001 A retrospective exhibition of Ruth Asawa's work, *Ruth Asawa: Completing the Circle*, is organized by the Fresno Art Museum.
- 2002 Asawa participates in the making of *The Garden of Remembrance* at San Francisco State University in memory of the devastation of Japanese American students and their families caused by World War II internment. It is a part of the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program.

Ruth Asawa: Completing the Circle is exhibited at the Oakland Museum of California from June 15 - September 22, 2002.

"Ruth Asawa: 1926 - present" courtesy of Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak Street, Oakland, California.

San Francisco Commissions by Ruth Asawa



- 1 *Aurora*
Embarcadero and Howard
- 2 *Parc 55 Hotel*
55 Cyril Magnin Way (motor entrance)
- 3 *Grand Hyatt*
Stockton Street, between Sutter and Post
- 4 *Ghirardelli Square*
900 North Point
- 5 *Buchanan Mall*
Between Sutter and Post

San Francisco Commission by Ruth Asawa courtesy of
Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak Street, Oakland, California

[Session 1, April 7, 2000]

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

J. IRITANI: I am Joanne Iritani, and I am in San Francisco to interview Ruth Asawa, Ruth Asawa Lanier. Today's date is April 7, 2000. We're in San Francisco at her home. I met Ruth a few times, but the last time was at the University of California Women Alums. . . Japanese American Women Alums meeting at which Ruth was the speaker. And, of course, I knew of her art because we [my husband Frank and I] had attended the [Japanese-American Internment Memorial] dedication in San Jose.

ASAWA: Oh, you did?

IRITANI: Yes, and I was just so astounded at your work there. I have not seen your work elsewhere. I know you have done many large pieces around San Francisco as well. However, I knew I had to interview you, and I was so pleased to have you respond to me, and call me, and set up this interview session. So, Ruth, I think I would like to have you start with your parents' background, as much as you know, and any anecdotes that you remember from your childhood, things that your parents may have told you about their own childhood in Japan. So you can go back as far as you like.

ASAWA: My father was Umakichi Asawa and my mother was Haru Yasuda. And she was a picture bride and my father was already in America. He came in 1902. But before that, before he came here, he was going to be put in the army. . . .

IRITANI: Oh, to be drafted by the Meiji government.

ASAWA: Yeah. He was going to be drafted to fight in the Sino-Russian War. And he didn't want to fight, so he thought that he would escape it by coming to Hawaii and coming to this country. And of course, he had to come because there was not enough work for him and his brother to live in Japan.

IRITANI: His family was in what kind of work?

ASAWA: His family farmed and were street vendors of *natto* and *tofu*.
[Both are soy bean products. *Natto* is fermented soy beans and *tofu* is soy bean cakes.]

IRITANI: I notice you have written Fukushima, Japan. Both your parents . . .

ASAWA: Both parents came from Fukushima Ken.

IRITANI: Was that Fukushima Shi {City} or. . . .

ASAWA: Well, they were in Koriyama. My mother came from Koriyama. And I don't remember, I don't know what town he came from. But the story goes, you know, the fairy tale or the tales of the past was that, originally, his family came from Hiroshima.

IRITANI: Oh-h.

ASAWA: And his family was part of the Asano Tagumi family. That tale. Whether it was true or not we're not sure.

IRITANI: That Asano. Explain that.

ASAWA: Aasno Tagumi. Well, it was the 47 Ronin and he was part of that. When they [the ronin or masterless samurai] committed suicide and the parents had to flee, the mothers. . . the women fled from Hiroshima, and they went to Fukushima and became peasants there. And so the name was changed from Asano to Asawa. And the Asawa name is very unusual. There is no other family that has that name, Asawa. We've been told that only our family has that name. And so, when he was a little boy, when my father was a little boy, he used to sell *natto* and tofu in his little cart and he'd go down the street very early in the morning, and he would sell his *natto* and tofu.

[Interruption]

IRITANI: Okay, we shall continue here with Ruth's family history, her father. . .

ASAWA: I don't have very much history. I just have that story, and we've always thought of looking it up. And my sister was going to look it up, but there's always that little kind of tale about your own family, so that gives a little color to your life.

IRITANI: I think that is really some story, though. Because Asano group.

ASAWA: They had to leave.

IRITANI: They had to leave and the samurai had to commit, what would you call it, *seppuku*? *harakiri*?

ASAWA: Harakiri. And so his family had nothing when they came to Fukushima. And my mother on the other hand was from the Yasuda clan or family. And they were weavers and silk worm growers. They used to raise silk worms and also weave cloth. We might still have some silk from that family. They were very, very good weavers. Before my mother died, she showed us how she spread the silk. . . the silk over the *futon* [quilt], to hold the cotton batt inside so it would not bunch up. And she would stretch it around the *futon* to make it stay in place.

So, I'll go back to 1905, my father didn't want to fight in the Russian-Sino War, so his brother who was older than he, came to this country with my father. [They stopped in Hawaii for a year or two.]

IRITANI: You have your father's date of immigration as 1902?

ASAWA: Yes.

IRITANI: And do you know about what year he was born?

ASAWA: He was born in. . . . He was 87 or 89 years old when he died and he died in 1969.

IRITANI: 1969. And he was 87?

ASAWA: He was 87 then. I think he was born in 1880 or '82. Something like that.

IRITANI: Something like that. Very good.

ASAWA: And I think he had a sister and maybe three brothers. And his oldest brother came to this country with him, and they worked in sugar beets.

IRITANI: In Hawaii?

ASAWA: Hawaii. And then they came to this country and they went to Salt Lake City and they worked there in sugar beets. They made quite a fortune at that time, but my uncle had a hole in his stomach. Now we would diagnose it as cancer or something, but they couldn't diagnose it and he died in 1929. They spent the fortune that they made in Utah on his illness. They had moved to southern California.

IRITANI: Around what area?

ASAWA: Around La Mirada, Norwalk, California, in Los Angeles County but it was a rural area then.

IRITANI: Closer to Orange County?

ASAWA: It was right next to Orange County, but it was near Whittier and Downey and Bellflower and Artesia. It's in that area and they farmed at La Mirada, which was up near Blue Hills.

IRITANI: Was it their farm, then?

ASAWA: No, they could not own property, so they leased it from several people, but the one that I remember was the Sutton family. S-U-T-T-O-N family. And they leased land to my father. There were several places and in total it was about 80 acres, but they leased land in Norwalk but in different places.

IRITANI: Shall we go back to your mother, now?

ASAWA: My mother was the youngest daughter and I don't remember how many sisters. There were ten in their family. She was the youngest girl and her brother was maybe younger than her, but she was next to the youngest. She was one of the younger ones. One became a midwife. And one came here. The oldest one came here in the arranged marriage of my uncle. My aunt was very lonely so she wanted a sister or somebody to keep her company and to become my father's bride.

IRITANI: So both sisters were picture brides.

ASAWA: They were picture brides. But, the funny thing about it was my mother was not chosen to come here. Her sister was chosen. Her older sister who was a midwife was chosen to come and she backed out. And so my mother said, "Well, I'll come then." So my mother was a substitute.

IRITANI: Do you know how old she was at that time then?

ASAWA: She was. . . . She came in 1919 and she was born in 1894 or '95. '94, I think. So, she was about 23 when she came. Of course, they all thought they were coming to paradise and

ASAWA: to wealth and to comfort, but the minute she came here, she began to have to cook for the camp. My father lived in a labor camp with a lot of men, single men, in the beginning, and then he married my mother and they lived near my father's brother and his wife who was my mother's sister.

Two brothers married two sisters. So I have double first cousins. Both parents were Zen Buddhists. Zen shuji, I think. I have nothing more. . . nothing clearer than that about the background of the two of them.

IRITANI: Did your mother talk about when she came? Did she come into Los Angeles then?

ASAWA: She came into Los Angeles County and they lived down there. And I've been here only because of my husband [William Albert Lanier] being here.

IRITANI: She was from a relatively wealthy home.

ASAWA: Well, I would say their education ended at sixth grade which was what was traditional.

IRITANI: At that time. Yes.

ASAWA: At that time, they had very little education, only what was standard. And then she came to this country and never learned English. So, she was very isolated. My father learned enough English to get through marketing and whatever was required for him to be a farmer. But neither one acquired an education in this country.

IRITANI: And so, you and your siblings were born down there in Norwalk?

ASAWA: My sister [Lois Masako], who passed away recently, was the first born. And then I have a brother named George, and a sister named Chiyo, and then I was the fourth, and then a brother

named Bill and my younger sister Kimiko, and the youngest was Janet. So, our life was always in Norwalk.

IRITANI: And you were out on the farm, so you had to be bussed to school?

ASAWA: We had to walk about a half a mile to the bus stop. And we went to Norwalk Grammar School and then to Excelsior Union High School which was a high school for many towns, like Artesia, Bellflower, Downey, Whittier, and the Blue Hills of Whittier were where the flowers were raised.

IRITANI: Blue Hills?

ASAWA: It used to be called Blue Hills. When my father first came to this country he lived near Santa Fe Springs, and a man tried to sell him some land. Of course, he couldn't own it, but this land was where the earth was very red. And he said, "That land was not worth anything because you couldn't plant anything." And it ended up being Santa Fe Springs where all the oil was found.

IRITANI: Could you recall incidents during your childhood with your siblings or with other people in the area? You were in a school that was not too far from you, and it was a very mixed school? Diverse as far as education?

ASAWA: Well, no, it had quite a few Japanese families. We lived in a place where we had a hog farm, we had other farms, vegetable truck farming, and we had flowers, we had a lot of florists. And, we had a dairy farm next to us with a Caucasian family. And

then around the corner was a hog farm that was run by a Japanese family, and we had a truck farm.

IRITANI: And so which vegetables did you grow?

ASAWA: Well, we grew everything. We grew carrots, spinach, parsley, parsnips, cauliflower, cabbage, tomatoes in the summer, strawberries in the spring, and cauliflower in the winter. So, we had winter crops. . . . We had four crops. We had four seasons. We had the summer crops. And then we had the fall crops. We had watermelons, melons, but we. . . . The commercial part of it was the melons. We grew beautiful cantaloupes and honeydew. In those days, when we got hungry, we'd just drop the melon on the ground and eat it all. We'd eat cucumbers if we were hungry. And we had beans. We had all seasonal vegetables. We had celery for shipping to the east and we used to grow tomatoes that were picked green to ship to the east coast.

IRITANI: What was actually your job?

ASAWA: My job was to build the fire for the bath. Every night. Every single night I had to make the fire for the bathtub. I mean *furoba*. And I did this from the age ten. I had to chop the wood and build the fire and keep it warm until all the vegetables were packed. We woke up very early . . .

IRITANI: So, you helped in the field as well?

ASAWA: Oh, yes. We all had to work after school. At 4:00 o'clock we'd come home, we had what we called *kojihan* which is a snack after school.

IRITANI: Oh, I've never heard of that term. K-O-J-I han. Han meaning meal, I guess.

ASAWA: Yeah. It was like a little snack. The school started at 9:00 o'clock and it ended at 3:00. The busses drove us home and we were in the field at 4:00, and we worked until 8:00 o'clock. And then we came in and we had to pack the things that we picked and then the truckers who came from the market, you know the farmer's market in Los Angeles, came to pick up the boxes and crates of vegetables and they took off. And sometimes in the summertime, we worked until midnight because we had about four or five workers helping in the harvest. They were Mexican and Filipino. And they came and we picked all the vegetables, the tomatoes and cucumbers and everything else that was ready. My mother would get up at 3:00 in the morning and my father would get up at 4:00 in the morning. And my father would set gopher traps all over the fields and my mother would [build a fire and cook the rice for the whole day. She did this outside in a large pot call a *kama*.]

IRITANI: The rice *kama*.

- ASAWA: Yes. And then we'd have rice for lunch and for dinner. So, we were real early risers. We had to get up early in the morning. It was to study or to get ready for school. So, that was my routine.
- IRITANI: And that occurred, not just when you were, like you said you started when you were ten. . . .
- ASAWA: Oh, actually I said when I was five. Working. Working. We got up early in the morning, five or six. And my mother got up at three and my father got up at four and we got up at five and then the workers came.
- IRITANI: All the children?
- ASAWA: All the children. And the workers came about seven. They started working at seven so everything had be ready whether it was for planting the seeds or planting the plants, it had to be ready, so we worked the night before until midnight, getting the onion sets ready or the strawberry runners cut and ready to plant or. . . . So, everything was a routine. The whole day and the night was just one thing because we were getting ready for the next operation. We did not work on Saturdays, but we worked always on Sundays, because we'd have to get ready for the Monday market. All the vegetables would have to be picked on Sunday so that they could be delivered on Monday.
- IRITANI: Did your father ever take the produce to the market himself, too?

- ASAWA: Oh, yes. Yes. I went, too. As a child I went to the Farmer's Market in Los Angeles.
- IRITANI: You drove all the way into Los Angeles?
- ASAWA: Yeah. You'd have to go at midnight. And then my brothers would go, too. And then he'd get home by one or two. And the market opened around two in the morning in Los Angeles. The
- ASAWA: Farmer's Market was near Olvera Street near the Mexican community.
- IRITANI: Right. Right downtown.
- ASAWA: And so it was a continuous sort of work.
- IRITANI: So, it was every day, every week, for the whole year, excepting for Saturdays.
- ASAWA: Saturdays we had to go *Gakuen*. To the Japanese language school.
- IRITANI: Where did you go for that?
- ASAWA: It was in Norwalk.
- IRITANI: It was in Norwalk.
- ASAWA: Uh-hm. And my father was one of the, not the founders, but one of the. . .
- IRITANI: Leaders.
- ASAWA: Right. They always met at night.
- IRITANI: Like the board.
- ASAWA: Right. And they met monthly.
- IRITANI: The school had a building of its own?

- ASAWA: Yes. We had land and I think it still exists in Norwalk. They're having a reunion, I think, in November. I think its, I don't know how many years it is, but somebody, someone told me to save some time in November. I don't remember.
- IRITANI: So they still gather? The people from Norwalk?
- ASAWA: They use it for a community center, now. I wouldn't know whether they have a language school any more.
- IRITANI: Probably not.
- ASAWA: But that was there when my parents came back after internment with just no place to go. So, they went to the language school.
- IRITANI: The Gakuen building.
- ASAWA: The Gakuen building, and then their house was the judo, the gymnasium building.
- IRITANI: Well, you went through school, and at the time before war started, were you and your siblings involved in your school activities? Were your parents ever involved with the school?
- ASAWA: No. Since they couldn't really speak, so they weren't part of the PTA [Parent Teacher Association]. I only remember one time that they went to attend a school meeting and that was because I had won a contest or something like that.
- IRITANI: You don't remember what the contest was?
- ASAWA: It was on liberty.
- IRITANI: Oh-h-h.
- ASAWA: It was on freedom or something like that.

IRITANI: Do you remember about how old you were, which grade?

ASAWA: I was in the eighth grade, I think. I believe I was in eighth grade, when they had that contest, a poster contest. I remember that.

IRITANI: Oh, so your artwork. . . .

ASAWA: So, I don't know what the subject was. I do have three paintings from camp time. My teacher there in Arkansas saved them all. And they were sent to me by the mayor of Rohwer. She sent them to me.

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

IRITANI: Do you remember as a child when you wanted to draw?

ASAWA: It wasn't so much. . . I don't think it was a desire to be an artist so much as not wanting people to tell me what to do.

IRITANI: [Laughter] It's independence!

ASAWA: Yeah. I didn't like to follow directions. You know, I didn't like my sisters to tell me what to do. How to be and how to behave. I just wanted to do it and the only place that you can show some independence is in art because no one was going to tell you what to do at that time. I was very independent and I was not a team player.

IRITANI and ASAWA: [Laughter]

ASAWA: And my sister was very bossy. She tried to boss all of us.

IRITANI: Your oldest sister.

ASAWA: My oldest sister. She wanted to boss all of us. And she could boss some of us. But she couldn't do anything with me.

IRITANI: [Laughter]

ASAWA: And she said, "Oh you're so sarcastic." And so, my mother knew that I was always making trouble. She would put me into picking beans because she could put me right there and I'd work by myself. I didn't need anybody around me. So, I was the official person to string the beans, string the bean-poles. Then I would be the one to pick the beans because I could be isolated in this field with nobody around me. And I would be required to pick so many crates a day that I'd have to get done. But it was a very nice.

IRITANI: And that was the way you liked it, too.

ASAWA: It was a time that I was able to daydream a lot, because I believe that daydreaming is not a bad thing.

IRITANI: No, no, no. I'm with you there.

ASAWA: And so I'd daydream a lot. I looked at the clouds and I'd do a lot of thinking or dreaming. And mostly I worked alone a lot. My mother would just say, "You go pick the beans." And she'd put the crates out there and then she'd put the newspapers around the crates, and then I'd have to go to those rows. And the rows were very long. And my brother would just irrigate. And the water would go. . . that was his job. Irrigation.

ASAWA: Irrigating all of the plants. And so we had parsley and all these things I could do by myself. And I would work with my mother on picking radishes, too, because the radishes, you know, they were broadcast. The seeds were scattered. And then you'd get on your knees and pick and she was very demanding. I learned how to work from my mother. She didn't work with just one hand. She always worked two hands. And she'd pick with her left and her right, left and right. And then she'd get a hemp tie and tie them together.

IRITANI: Were you ambidextrous as well?

ASAWA: You had to be. You had to be for sorting tomatoes?

IRITANI: Use both hands.

ASAWA: Both hands. And we had a box of very green, different sizes. we helped sort them out and put the number twos here, number ones here, green ones here, pink ones here. And we had to make decisions without even thinking about it. Look at it. And I had so much practice with that. And with the radishes, we had to put them into a crate, and with the melons we'd have to crate, and cabbages we would have to pack three dozen to a crate.

IRITANI: So, it was a lot of work for all of you. Even the youngest one.

ASAWA: You know, my mother nursed all of us. Each child nursed until the next one came. And she always had a baby on her back.

IRITANI: On her back, yeah.

- ASAWA: I remember that. That was the only time she had a vacation during the day.
- IRITANI: [Laughter] Oh, that was labor. Vacation labor. And so, you grew up on the farm. You were in high school when the war started.
- ASAWA: On that day, that Sunday, remember?
- IRITANI: Right, December seventh [1941].
- ASAWA: At eight o'clock, no it was eleven o'clock here on the coast. It was eight o'clock in Hawaii. Eleven o'clock here.
- IRITANI: Were you already outside?
- ASAWA: We were out in the fields. And so we came running in.
- IRITANI: Did someone tell you?
- ASAWA: Yes. Somebody came running out to the field saying that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor. We didn't know where Pearl Harbor was, but we quickly found out it was in Hawaii, and we dashed in to a radio. That was how we heard the news.
- IRITANI: And what year were you in high school?
- ASAWA: I was a junior and the next day we went to school. We had a wonderful principal and he says you can't blame these children.
- IRITANI: Did he have an assembly?
- ASAWA: Yeah, it was an assembly. The first thing we had an assembly and he said that they're not responsible for the war.
- IRITANI: Very good.
- ASAWA: I remember we all felt kind of. . . with our heads down. We were confused about it. So that was the fall semester of school.

And then we stopped going to school in February or March. We stayed home.

IRITANI: Oh, you did?

ASAWA: Until May, I think. I can't even remember that.

IRITANI: I know we left in May.

ASAWA: Yeah, we were in the assembly center.

IRITANI: In Santa Anita?

ASAWA: Santa Anita in May. So we lost the whole junior year. I didn't learn geometry, I didn't learn algebra, and the things we didn't learn, I still don't know.

IRITANI: At that time in high school, what did you consider your major?

ASAWA: I majored in art.

IRITANI: You did? So, at what point did you decide that that would be your major? About how old were you?

ASAWA: Well, you had, sort of you had to have a major, I guess. I can't remember in high school, but we took a class in art. And we took other classes. We took English and history and math and everything else. Then when we chose our field, I chose art.

IRITANI: But not before you got into high school?

ASAWA: Well, I was always interested in art. I was probably in third grade when I became interested in art.

IRITANI: Really? From third grade.

ASAWA: I sort of thought I would like to do that. I didn't know what kind of art, you know. Cartooning or just. . . . But, the art was not

very remarkable, except in seventh grade we had an art teacher who was a landscape painter. So, in those days, if you would take music you would have a musician teach. And you'd have an artist teach or you would have a dancer teach.

[Telephone ringing]

[Interruption]

IRITANI: We shall continue with your art experiences.

ASAWA: Well, think I might have been ten or eleven, saying I was really interested in art, but we did have artists, well, not in elementary school. . . well, in elementary school in seventh grade, sixth, seventh grades, we had music. We had choral music. And we had somebody who played piano and sang. We had a teacher named Kathleen Gregory and she was a soprano. So she would sing for us and it was great, because she would sing and she would sing these high notes, and we could see her blood vessel pop out. [Laughter] They taught a subject that they knew well and I remember that exposure. And we also had an assembly once a month. We had puppeteers or dancers or musicians, magicians come to the school and these artists would go up and down California. And they would perform. And I think that experience leaves an impression on children when they see a genuine person doing something. I think it gives you, even if it's for twenty minutes or an hour, if you see, because I remember Mexican puppeteers coming to our school in

Norwalk and they had the puppets strapped to their waist so they were big. Big puppets. Life size puppets. And I will never forget that.

IRITANI: You were fascinated by them.

ASAWA: I think it's very important to give children basic experiences. They remember. It's like the Rose Bowl Tournament. Or Nisei Week you go to Los Angeles. You remember these experiences, I think.

IRITANI: Yes. And the beautiful creations that somebody else. . .

ASAWA: . . . made. Right.

IRITANI: That's good inspirational background for the child.

ASAWA: So, it's not just in the classroom. There's always other experiences that count for something.

IRITANI: And so, here you are in high school, majoring in art, and you were going to school, you were bussed to school?

ASAWA: We took the bus to Excelsior Union High School.

IRITANI: Excelsior. That was also in Norwalk?

ASAWA: Norwalk. Excelsior Union High School. And we had. . . she was not an artist, but she was an art teacher. And she was always encouraging us to do things. And there were a lot of talented children in that class and I remember them. In high school I took dancing. I took modern dance. And this teacher was a dancer. And it was the first modern dance teacher in California. It was very new then. But she was a wonderful teacher. I even

remember her name. Her name was Fredrika Moore. And she wore these flowing dresses and she danced in her bare feet and left a very big impression on her students.

IRITANI: The freedom of her movements were. . .

ASAWA: Right. It was incredible. It was not just gym. It's not baseball, although I did play baseball. I played shortstop.

IRITANI: For the team?

ASAWA: Yes. I was on the baseball team. But, I wasn't very good because I couldn't catch.

[Laughter]

ASAWA: But they always made me a shortstop.

IRITANI: So, up to that point, you had a positive high school experience.

ASAWA: Oh, yes, it was wonderful. You know what it was? We worked so hard on the farm that we were. . . my mother would threaten us that she'd keep us at home on the farm if we didn't study. So, we studied very hard, because we didn't want to be stuck on the farm.

[Laughter]

ASAWA: So, we were very good students and we worked very hard because there was no choice. We had to work hard at that time.

IRITANI: When you were in high school, you were still working on the farm. . .

ASAWA: Oh, yes. We worked up to midnight. We'd work until it got pitch black. My mother. . . we would tease our mother as having cat eyes.

[Laughter]

ASAWA: So, she'd work until it's absolutely black. And then, we'd have to pack everything for the truckers to come. And then, we'd eat dinner, take a bath, and then we would have to study. So our homework, we'd start our homework at about eleven. Then again we'd fall asleep and then we would have to get up for the next day. So, that homework was not as hard as working on the farm.

[Laughter]

IRITANI: Let's go back now to December 7th now. You said you were working on the farm and went to school the next day.

ASAWA: Yeah, the next day.

IRITANI: And you principal held an assembly. How many Japanese American students were there?

ASAWA: There were quite a few. There were quite a few families there.

IRITANI: All farmers?

ASAWA: No, some were dry cleaners, dry goods merchants, grocers. And so there was a variety. Some were not teachers, but our teachers [for Japanese language school] came from Los Angeles. And just before Pearl Harbor, our teachers all were sent back to Japan.

IRITANI: Oh, they were?

- ASAWA: They were Japanese teachers from Japan who were living in Los Angeles. And they were sent back. And I was taking *kendo* [Japanese fencing] with my sister. My sister was a real tom boy.
- IRITANI: Which sister was that?
- ASAWA: My oldest sister, Lois. And she always, when it was time to go to language school on Saturday morning, she'd sit in the car honking the horn, getting us out of the house to go to school. We were always late. And at school they had the *rajio taiso fuji* the radio exercise when we'd do the *ichi ni san shi go roku*.
- IRITANI: Right.
- ASAWA: We'd do that but we'd always sort of be late for that. But, she would always drive us. She drove the car so we all got in. But anyway, what were we talking about?
- IRITANI: Do you remember in your Japanese school about what book did you finish? What level did you study?
- ASAWA: Oh, I was not very good. I was probably third or fourth, something like that.
- IRITANI: Can you still. . .
- ASAWA: I can do the *hiragana* and the *katakana* and a little *kanji*, but not much. I can't carry on a conversation with some diplomat. I won't know what he's talking about. Politics. I can talk about the weather, and I can do that. And then we had Kanda sensei and his father. And his father was an old fashioned teacher and one day I fell asleep in his class and he had a big stick and he'd

come right to me and he'd hit the table [bang] like that. And he'd always do this. He embarrassed me. Anyway, we learned to do calligraphy. We did take our newspapers. We'd cut the paper in half and we'd make tablets. And we practiced how to write with the brush, *sumie*. We'd have to rub our sumi stick in water on the sumi rock to make our ink. This was a wonderful experience.

IRITANI: And so, you came to December seventh and you were talking about the principal. Were there other teachers who also showed sensitivity?

ASAWA: Some were understanding. And then because my sister and I studied kendo our loyalty was suspected. Because the teacher belonged to a society and we were taking his class, we were suspect.

IRITANI: You were also considered a threat.

ASAWA: My father, though he was not a member of that society, was interned early because of that association.

IRITANI: With the kendo.

ASAWA: After the war, one of the teachers came back and taught kendo in Los Angeles.

IRITANI: Well, do you remember about your father's arrest?

ASAWA: Yes, uh-huh.

IRITANI: Do you remember about when that occurred?

ASAWA: It was about February 11th or 12th or somewhere in that area. It was just before we were interned. The two FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] men came to the house. My father was working in the field around 11 o'clock in the morning. And two men came and they flashed their badge and they said, "We're from the FBI. We've come to pick you up." And so, he came in and they allowed him to eat lunch and we ironed a shirt for him and he got into his black suit, then he went. And that was it.

IRITANI: Did they search your house? Do you remember?

ASAWA: I don't remember the search very much because there wasn't anything to search in our house.

[Laughter]

ASAWA: There was nothing of value in our house. We had no books. We had no weapons. We were just a poor farming family. But, of course, we had the emperor's picture.

IRITANI: Emperor. . .?

ASAWA: Hirohito.

IRITANI: Oh, it was Hirohito.

ASAWA: And we took that down.

IRITANI: You had taken it down before they came.

ASAWA: Yes, yes. And all the kendo, the equipment, my father said we had to burn it. And all of this was burned.

IRITANI: Oh, it was?

ASAWA: Yes. In 1935, when I was nine years old, I was ready to go to Japan to study Japanese and to be educated.

IRITANI: A lot of families did that.

ASAWA: And so my aunt had made me a trunkful of clothes and then I was going to go with a second cousin or some relative of my father's who went to Japan often. He went back and forth. But, at that time, he had a stroke.

IRITANI: Your father?

ASAWA: No, my father's cousin. He was going to take me to Japan. And he died.

IRITANI: And so. . .

ASAWA: I didn't go. So, in 1939, my younger sister, Kimiko was ready to go. She was nine in '39, so all those clothes were in Japan would fit her. So she went in my place. And my oldest sister also went to study Japanese in Tokyo or somewhere. And to the women's university there.

IRITANI: Oh, really?

ASAWA: I can't remember the name. But she was ready to go and so my oldest sister took my youngest sister and I was not interested in going anymore. By then I was twelve, thirteen graduating from elementary school and I didn't want to go to Japan anymore. So she went and she got caught in Japan.

IRITANI: Oh, both of them?

ASAWA: No, no. My oldest sister was coming back and she tried to bring our sister, too. But my aunt in Japan, she persuaded her to stay and so she stayed.

IRITANI: So, your older sister came back like in 1940?

ASAWA: 1941. She was on the last ship which was called *Tatsuta Maru*. It came. It was the last boat to come. And then they came so far. . .

IRITANI: I think this [tape] is going to end here so I'm going to go ahead and stop it.

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

IRITANI: . . . go on. Would you like to tell something more about your sister who was left in Japan?

ASAWA: My [eldest] sister did very well. And she was a good student in Japan. She was told that she'd better leave if she wanted to get out of Japan, but something was happening and the war was going to happen. And so, she tried to get my younger sister out of Japan, but our aunt in Japan wanted to keep her there. And while she was there, she was treated like an enemy alien. She had the equivalent of an FBI man follow her all around.

IRITANI: Your older sister?

ASAWA: No, younger sister. And she was only nine or ten. Something like that. Ten years old. Or eleven. So, she was followed. She had a government man assigned to her as a child. And she had to prove that she was a good Japanese.

- IRITANI: Where was she living?
- ASAWA: Fukushima. In Koriyama.
- IRITANI: In Koriyama.
- ASAWA: They had a house and my father and my mother, my parents sent money back to Japan all these years to build the house. So, we had a house in Japan. But, after the war, it was all confiscated.
- IRITANI: Well, Koriyama did get bombed, because Koriyama was an industrial area.
- ASAWA: When bombs fell, they went to the river and got into the water.
- IRITANI: And what happened to your sister?
- ASAWA: She came back when she was sixteen.
- IRITANI: After the war?
- ASAWA: After the war she came back. And then she went to San Francisco State and graduated from there.
- IRITANI: So, now your family was preparing to. . . . Well, your father was taken by the FBI.
- ASAWA: We didn't know where he was for a long time. But my sister, in talking to her, she was always in contact. She never told us. But, she knew that he was in Topanga Canyon [Federal Detention] for a while, and then shipped around, and finally he went to Lordsburg, New Mexico, so we knew. . .
- IRITANI: There was more contact there.
- ASAWA: There was a man named Mr. Takeuchi who could write. . .

- IRITANI: In English.
- ASAWA: In English, because the Japanese language was illegal. So, he wrote in English and he sent a letter or letters to me while I was a student.
- IRITANI: Well, you first went into Santa Anita [Assembly Center] in probably May?
- ASAWA: I was fifteen or sixteen then.
- IRITANI: Was it already May by then?
- ASAWA: Yes, it was May. May we went there. And we were still there until September. And then we were shipped to Rohwer, Arkansas.
- IRITANI: Rohwer? Okay. So, first, Santa Anita was a race track.
- ASAWA: And we lived in one of the first stables.
- IRITANI: Oh, you were in one of the stables, too.
- ASAWA: Yes, we had two together.
- IRITANI: Your whole family.
- ASAWA: There were seven of us, so we got two.
- IRITANI: How large were those rooms?
- ASAWA: Oh, they were really small. It was enough for a horse.
- IRITANI: Just a stall for a horse.
- ASAWA: Yeah, right. Double door.
- IRITANI: Double door.
- ASAWA: Dutch door.
- IRITANI: Right. And the two rooms held all the beds.

- ASAWA: The cots. We had cots. And we had to stuff our mattresses.
- IRITANI: Your mattresses with straw. So many people have told me about those stalls, about how. . .
- ASAWA: Oh, it was just white-washed.
- IRITANI: And they say you could even see where the spiders and the flies were white-washed down onto the walls.
- ASAWA: [Chuckle] And the horse's, the hair would be in the cracks where the horse scratched.
- IRITANI: Was it awfully smelly for you?
- ASAWA: Yeah. It was. Oh, it was just like being in the. . .
- IRITANI: Still in the stall with the horse.
- ASAWA: It was pretty, well what would you say, they didn't do anything.
- IRITANI: Except to whitewash.
- ASAWA: They whitewashed it. They might have washed the floor a little bit. And that was it. And so, we stayed outside during the day. It was only at night that we were. . .
- IRITANI: Just for sleeping purposes, the rooms were used.
- ASAWA: Right.
- IRITANI: Let's see, you were already fifteen, so the youngest child in your family was. . .
- ASAWA: She was born in 1935.
- IRITANI: So, she was only seven. She was only about seven years old.

ASAWA: And her life was very different from mine because she had to stay her whole childhood in camp. And I got out, I left to go to college.

IRITANI: You got out of Rohwer as soon as you graduated from high school?

ASAWA: I graduated from high school in 1943 and they tried to persuade all of us to go out because we were always making trouble, you know.

IRITANI: [Laughter] You were?

ASAWA: I mean the teenagers. They wanted all, as soon as they got old enough, they wanted everyone out, because they were causing trouble, you know, I think. [Laughter] So, I got out in the fall. I graduated in. . . . Well, we got to camp in September or October, and school started probably in November. So we lost our senior life. I lost all the junior, but I got credit. I mean they gave me credit for the time. They wanted to make up for lost time.

IRITANI: Do you remember your activities in Rohwer? Well, first of all, in Santa Anita.

ASAWA: Santa Anita?

IRITANI: Describe that.

ASAWA: There were a lot of talent nights there, music, singing. They had baseball. Baseball was very important. I never went to a movie or anything. They did have movies there, but you had to walk to them.

IRITANI: An outdoor theater?

ASAWA: They had a barrack that had movies, I think. But I never went to any of those. But I did go to the bleachers to the talent night. They had singers, and they had dancers, and they had people who were sort of okay. Okay entertainers who entertained. It was very nice.

IRITANI: And was the area divided into blocks like it was later at Rohwer? Or how did they. . .

ASAWA: No, they had these rows of stalls and that housed one group of people. And the race track where they housed others, but we didn't know them.

IRITANI: How about your meals? Was it one seating?

ASAWA: There were three. . . 11:30, 12:00, 12:30.

IRITANI: Three times.

ASAWA: You got a card. A ticket. Yellow or red, I don't remember quite what.

IRITANI: Was that assigned right from the beginning when you went into Santa Anita?

ASAWA: Yeah, uh-huh.

IRITANI: So, you had to make sure you didn't lose that. It was your meal ticket basically.

ASAWA: Right. And that was when the family began to fall apart. The teenagers would go with their friends.

IRITANI: That's right.

- ASAWA: And the worst thing that they ever gave us, it was supposed to be Japanese. But they gave us rice pudding. [Laughter] It was rice, leftover rice and raisins and milk. They gave us rice pudding.
- IRITANI: In the wrong form. The rice.
- ASAWA: And they would have waiters. And they would say, "You want tea? Coffee?"
- IRITANI: They were Issei working.
- ASAWA: Issei.
- IRITANI: While you were in Santa Anita, did your mother work?
- ASAWA: My mother did not work at any time in Santa Anita. She worked in Rohwer. She had a job in the kitchen, not cooking, but serving.
- IRITANI: Did you ever work while you were in either camp?
- ASAWA: No, I didn't. There were camouflage nets that we could make for pennies, or we could go to school. And college students became our teachers and people from Disney Studios taught. They were internees, so they became teachers for us. So, we had wonderful teachers.
- IRITANI: So they had art class?
- ASAWA: Yeah, Tom Okamoto taught drawing, figure drawing and I think Ben Tanaka was one and Chris Ishii.
- IRITANI: And that was part of the classes, regular high school classes.

ASAWA: Yeah, they were informal. They had the classes in the bleachers. And my sister taught English. And there was an old teacher who taught geometry.

IRITANI: But, in Santa Anita it was not considered part of the school system.

ASAWA: It was not. There was no school. It was just volunteers.

IRITANI: Volunteers set up their own classes.

ASAWA: Or you could work for \$9.00 a month making the camouflage nets. And so, camouflage nets were in the front, you know, from the bleachers down to the bottom, and the bleachers were up here. And the camouflage nets were in front. In front of the bleachers. We were up here, studying, and the camouflage nets were in front, and so all the terrible odor from the burlap. Oh the burlap dyes. They were made to be green and blue and brown and orange and all the jungle colors. And they were. . . my friend Chuckie Watanabe worked on that and he got \$9.00 a month.

IRITANI: What was her first name?

ASAWA: Chuckie Watanabe. And she was kind of a leader.

IRITANI: And so in September or October you moved over to Rohwer?

ASAWA: And the first group that went, went to Heart Mountain [Wyoming]. The first train was to Heart Mountain. And then we went to [Rohwer]. Arkansas. We went through Arizona, and Chicago. . .

- IRITANI: Way up to Chicago? And down.
- ASAWA: And down to Arkansas. And during the day, they closed the windows.
- IRITANI: All the shades.
- ASAWA: It was so hot!
- IRITANI: And it was four or five days before you got there.
- ASAWA: Right.
- IRITANI: And you were in Rohwer until when? You said you left.
- ASAWA: The whole family. My mother and brothers and sisters went in 1942 in September or October. . .
- IRITANI: To Rohwer.
- ASAWA: And then I left camp in '43. When I graduated.
- IRITANI: Right after you graduated from high school.
- ASAWA: I had one year in school.
- IRITANI: Almost a year.
- ASAWA: Almost a year. It wasn't a year. They kept coming back. You know, whenever they can get a person to come to teach us. We had people from Minnestota, we had teachers from Tennessee. They were from the south. We had some pretty good teachers. And we would have to pledge allegiance. And somebody in the back would say, "Except me." [inaudible]. It made the teacher so mad. Mrs. Johnston. Pearl Johnston. I think her name was Pearl Johnston. She'd get so mad. She was the social studies teacher. [chuckle]

IRITANI: And so, you left about in June? July?

ASAWA: I left in August, I think.

IRITANI: In August. Before the school started.

ASAWA: Before school started. I went to Milwaukee. Because we had catalogs from all over and I thought I would love to go to Chicago. The Art Institute was something like \$240.00 a year. Or \$240.00 a semester. But, Milwaukee was \$25.00 a year. So, I went to the cheapest place I could go to. My brothers and sisters went to a Quaker college. They were invited to go to a Quaker college in Iowa. I didn't want to go there. So, I went off to Milwaukee.

IRITANI: Again, you were the most independent. [Chuckle]

ASAWA: I went to Milwaukee.

IRITANI: And that was the University of Milwaukee?

ASAWA: No, it was called Milwaukee State Teacher's College, then. Remember when Teacher's College was separate from the Universities? So, it was called that. And now, it's the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. It's a huge campus, and in 1998, they gave me my degree.

IRITANI: Oh, really?

ASAWA: Because I went there and I was ready to practice teach. I went there three years and they wouldn't let me practice teach.

IRITANI: They wouldn't?

ASAWA: They said they couldn't place me. Because of the war.

IRITANI: Oh, uh-huh.

- ASAWA: It was 1946. But they couldn't, they still couldn't.
- IRITANI: Felt that they could not place you as a teacher.
- ASAWA: Because the sentiments were still raw.
- IRITANI: Still, still there.
- ASAWA: So, I went to another school. I went to Black Mountain College which was an experimental college in North Carolina.
- IRITANI: Where is that, in North Carolina?
- ASAWA: It's at Black Mountain. It's called Black Mountain College at Black Mountain, North Carolina. It was a small, little town.
- IRITANI: On the west side of North Carolina?
- ASAWA: Near Asheville. It's about fifteen miles from Asheville. I think it's in the western part of the state, isn't it?
- IRITANI: It sounds like Asheville would be on the way.
- ASAWA: The college lasted twenty three years.
- IRITANI: Oh, it's not there anymore?
- ASAWA: No, it's not there anymore.
- IRITANI: Experimental.
- ASAWA: Experimental, unaccredited. It didn't guarantee anything for you, but it was a good education. I had a wonderful time there.
- IRITANI: So, did you graduate from there, too?
- ASAWA: No, there was no graduation.
- IRITANI: No graduation.

- ASAWA: No graduation. They give you a little test, but it was not accredited, so they wouldn't give you a degree. I never had a degree until Milwaukee gave me one in 1998.
- IRITANI: Way after the fact.
- ASAWA: Right. I didn't want an honorary degree. I wanted a degree so I could teach. I had plenty of honorary degrees. But, I can't teach with them in the elementary schools.
- IRITANI: You have listed here University of Mexico.
- ASAWA: I went for a summer there. It was during the war. The war ended. I was in Mexico when the war ended.
- IRITANI: Oh, really? In August.
- ASAWA: August sixth [1945], I remember. And the funny thing is the Mexicans were very unhappy because the Japanese had lost the war.
- IRITANI: Oh, really?
- ASAWA: They had been rooting for Japan.
- IRITANI: For Japan. Oh, really?
- ASAWA: At the time. . .
- IRITANI: Now, how did you choose to go to University of Mexico?
- ASAWA: I don't remember why I went there. Oh, my sister, Lois, was going to University of Mexico to study Spanish. So, she persuaded me to go with her.
- IRITANI: To join her.
- ASAWA: Yes. So, I went along.

- IRITANI: So, you're proficient in Spanish?
- ASAWA: No, no. I just learned a few words in Spanish. I didn't learn anything. I went to study Mexican architecture and Mexican dance. I took those two.
- IRITANI: You were there just a few months, during the summer.
- ASAWA: I went just for the summer.
- IRITANI: And then you went on to your Black Mountain College.
- ASAWA: And then I came back to do my third year in Milwaukee. See I went after my second year. That was in 1945 I went for the summer there. And then I came back to study another year in Milwaukee. And now I wanted to study another year, and do my practice teaching.
- IRITANI: You were discouraged from doing it, anyway. So, you just gave that part up?
- ASAWA: After my third year, and I went for the summer session at Black Mountain, I was only going for the summer to Black Mountain, but I stayed three years, and I spent two summers there in Milwaukee.
- IRITANI: And after you finished all those years, you were by now in your twenties. . .
- ASAWA: I had gone non-stop to college, except when I went to Mexico and I went to school there, too. I had seven years college by then. Seven and a half years of college and no degree.
- IRITANI: And no degree to go with it. And so, what did you do then?

ASAWA: So, when I finished it, I came to San Francisco to be married.

IRITANI: Your family was where?

ASAWA: They were at the Gakuen. In Norwalk. And they had bought about three acres of land there.

IRITANI: Under your sister's name?

ASAWA: I don't know how they got it. My two brothers might have bought it. And they farmed there. After the war, my mother and my father and my sister Janet got a one-way ticket from Arkansas, one-way ticket to Glendale, Arizona, because a farmer there needed some farm help. So, in order to leave camp, you had to have a guaranteed job. So, they got hired by a farmer in Glendale, Arizona. And they were there for about a year.

IRITANI: They were Japanese farmers?

ASAWA: Yeah, I think so. And so, they were there and they saved enough money to come back to Norwalk. And so they came to Norwalk and they bought the three acres and they lived there. In the Gakuen. And then from there they sold that and went farther out to Anaheim. And they bought ten acres there, plus another field. They had a strawberry farm then. And that was before Disneyland.

IRITANI: Of course. [Laughter] And all that growth down there.

ASAWA: Anyway, that's another story. [Laughter]

IRITANI: And so you didn't go back to your family area?

- ASAWA: I was going to go back to help them on the farm. And then I had a student, friend, from Milwaukee said, "You know, anybody can work on a farm. But, you have an obligation to study art." So, I took her advice and I went on to school.
- IRITANI: So, you never got back to Norwalk.
- ASAWA: Well, they needed help and my brother came back. So, I stayed in school. From Black Mountain, I came here.
- IRITANI: And where did you meet your husband?
- ASAWA: At school.
- IRITANI: Oh, he was a student at Milwaukee?
- ASAWA: No, at Black Mountain.
- IRITANI: Oh, he was a Black Mountain student.
- ASAWA: Yes. He came from the south. He came from Georgia Tech.
- IRITANI: Oh, he had completed his study?
- ASAWA: No, no. He had studied many years in architecture, but then he came to Black Mountain. He didn't get a degree. And so neither of us had a degree. And then we went to Black Mountain. And at Black Mountain was where I met some wonderful people.
- IRITANI: Probably you met people who were much more open and independent just as you were.
- ASAWA: They all were. I mean, Merce Cunningham had just left his dance company, Martha Graham's. He started his own company. John Cage was experimenting with music. And Willem de

Kooning was experimenting with painting, and Robert Rauschenberg.

IRITANI: It was an experimental school

ASAWA: And the students came from all over. And so, all these people who were just kind of searching for something were at Black Mountain. So, in that environment, I had a wonderful environment for learning to be bold. To be unafraid. Unafraid of failure or whatever it was. And so, it was a great setting. A great lesson for me. And chose not to be afraid, to experiment, to explore, to try something new.

IRITANI: To be yourself.

ASAWA: To never mind what people think, to do it. And I learned all that from all these people. I had a very good teacher. Myself.

IRITANI: And then you were married.

ASAWA: No, after my move to San Francisco. And California had just passed the law that, what do you call it? It repealed the anti. . . intermarriage.

IRITANI: Anti-miscegenation.

ASAWA: Yeah, that was in the fall of 1948. And we were planning to go to Nevada, or to Reno, if we had to, to get married. Because in California it was illegal.

IRITANI: So, you came to San Francisco, and you were able to marry, and did you get this place at that time?

ASAWA: No, no. We rented a loft over an onion warehouse.

IRITANI: [Laughter] Oh, the smells.

[End Tape 2, Side A]

[Begin Tape 2, Side B]

IRITANI: This is Side B, Tape 2. You want to go ahead and tell us how your art work is developing at this point. What you were doing.

ASAWA: In 1950, I had just come back from Black Mountain College and there were a lot of ideas about designing lamps and designing fabric and all that sort of thing. It had not jelled, but sort of floated in my head.

IRITANI: The ideas were there.

ASAWA: The ideas I had gotten from Black Mountain, I wanted to transfer to practical use. And so, at that time, there were a lot of showrooms here. [It became Jackson Square. I tried to market some ideas.

IRITANI: To whom?

ASAWA: To K-N-E-E-D-L-E-R.

IRITANI: K-N-E-E-D-L-E-R.

ASAWA: Kneeder Fauchere F-A-U-C-H-E-R-E.

IRITANI: F-A-U-C-H-E-R-E.

ASAWA: Something like that.

IRITANI: Was that a company?

ASAWA: It was a . . . at that time it the leading kind of design company for home furnishings. It was a time that Eames and all of these people were experimenting.

- IRITANI: What was that name? Spell that.
- ASAWA: E-A-M-E-S. Eames.
- IRITANI: E-A-M-E-S. And who was that artist?
- ASAWA: Charles Eames designed the Bank chair. You know the molded plywood chairs? The times when a lot of effort was being made to design new furniture, lamps, fabric. It was that period.
- IRITANI: It was a good period for you.
- ASAWA: Stimulating. Experimenting with new materials and with new designs and new use of methods of designing and making use of the new technology. It was an interesting time for artists.
- IRITANI: And you were married.
- ASAWA: I was married.
- IRITANI: And your husband was doing what?
- ASAWA: He was working for an architect. He was an architect and he worked. . . . He came here a year before I came to work in the building trades. I mean to be a carpenter and learn all of this, and then he got a job with an architectural firm here. He worked for twelve years until he started his own firm.
- IRITANI: And you were both very creative though, and it sounds like Black Mountain kind of brought things together for you.
- ASAWA: It was not looking for an ethnic or anything. It was a union having a common interest more than the color of your skin kind of thing. And that's in a way how we've always felt.

IRITANI: And so, here you've started with your new ideas, were you able to market your new ideas?

ASAWA: I've never pursued marketing. I've always been interested in struggling with new ideas. And so, I've had opportunities to try new things out. Like the Hyatt fountain which was an experiment in working just with dough.

IRITANI: What year did you do that now?

ASAWA: I finished it in 1973. I started in 1970 and '71. I took two and half years to work on that.

IRITANI: And it was your own idea to use the dough?

ASAWA: No, it was by working with children to find a cheap non-toxic material. Dough seemed to be logical because its something that is available in a grocery store. You use your own kitchen and you can then make something. But, I just took an idea from Black Mountain. Find a new definition of an old material. So, like dough, or like paper, or like metal, or like anything. So, our interest is primarily in materials, I think, rather than a new expression. Trying to find another way to use ordinary materials.

IRITANI: Had you done any other commissioned work before that?

ASAWA: I did. The first one was a fountain in Fox Plaza. It's a small little fountain.

IRITANI: And where is that?

ASAWA: Fox? It's at Tenth and Market.

IRITANI: Okay. And your creation is still there?

ASAWA: It's still there. And it's a little tired because it's 1964 that I made that. And then the second one was the Ghirardelli mermaids in Ghirardelli Square. I did those in 1968.

IRITANI: What had you been doing before you had this Fox Plaza?

ASAWA: Well, I was experimenting with wire sculpture. I did a lot of work by myself working at home, and having my studio here so that my children could know me.

IRITANI: So, when did you start having children?

ASAWA: 1950.

IRITANI: Well, at this point, just name your children and tell us a little about where they are at this point.

ASAWA: Well, I think, as of today I may be a great grandmother because my oldest, Xavier, is about to be a grandfather. Gerry and Xavier. He married Gerry and they have sons named Xavier, Junior, and Christopher. Christopher's going to be a father today or tomorrow and so Xavier and Gerry are grandparents. And so that makes us great grandparents. And then Aiko is our second child, and she's married to Larry Cuneo. And they have two sons, Ken and Hudson Cuneo. Ken is going to be married in September and so we are going to have another. . . Ken's going to have a wife and her name is Carrie. And so, that's going to take place in September.

IRITANI: Is that Karrie K-?

ASAWA: C-A-R-R-I-E, I believe. And she comes from Reading, Pennsylvania. Italian. And so, maybe we're going to have more great grandchildren.

IRITANI: Kids all over the house.

ASAWA: But, the thing is, our own children and there are six of them, all live in Noe Valley. Our third child is Hudson and he's married to Terry. And they have two children named Max and Lillie. And then Adam is single. Then we have Laurie who is married to Peter Weverka. And they have two children. Aiko Sophia and Henry Gabriel. Their house is around the corner, but the rear garden is contiguous to our own, so we share a big garden with them. And then Paul. Paul is married to Sandra, Sandra Halladey. They live down the street and they have two children, Emma and William. That's our last one. So we have five children who are married with two children each, one who is single, and they all live in San Francisco.

IRITANI: Kept you hopping. Tell us how you were able to do any art work when the kids were little.

ASAWA: Well, I've always believed in having a studio, my work area in the house. I didn't believe in having a studio away from home.

IRITANI: Some place else.

ASAWA: So, they always knew what I was doing. And so when they were hungry or they want something to eat, or a peanut butter sandwich.

IRITANI: Right.

ASAWA: When they wanted something, I would get them to work on my work and they learned that it would have been easier to make their own peanut butter sandwich. And anyway, so they all used their hands. They all learned to use their hands, and so I have Paul, he's a potter, a ceramic artist. Aiko is an artist. She paints and she draws and she teaches. She makes sculptures. And the boys all can build. They all learned how to build. And Hudson and Xavier learned to build houses and Adam works with Hudson and he works in wood and he does construction and so they are all. . . . And Laurie is a teacher and she can write. And her husband is a writer. And so they're all into something in the arts. And they're all self-motivated and mostly self-employed.

IRITANI: And all along the way, you have been creating.

ASAWA: Yes, I make jam, and I make pickles.

IRITANI: [Laughter] You do that, too?

ASAWA: We have an *ume* plum tree. So, I have to make some *shiso* [a beefsteak plant]. I have to always grow *shiso*. I've lost my crop, so I have to start all over again and replant. We plant lettuce and zucchini, and all of that. And that is something we learned at Black Mountain. It's just as important to do the artwork as it is to be responsible for your community.

IRITANI: For your community. Very good.

ASAWA: You have to make it all blend so that one doesn't overrule the other. You have to balance it. You have to balance what you want to do yourself with what you have to do with your children and with your neighbors, with your community.

IRITANI: That's a great philosophy.

ASAWA: It works.

IRITANI: Yes, and you're living it. And so you've created all these things and you continue to create. And you've had showings in various places?

ASAWA: Well, in San Francisco I have about six public works. At Ghirardelli Square I have a fountain, and I have one at Fox Plaza which is a little fountain, and I have one at Bayside Plaza which is at Howard and Embarcadero. It's a fountain there. And then I have two in Nihonmachi in Japan Town. It's at Buchanan Mall. Two fountains there. And then I have one at Park Fifty Five which is a hotel at Fifth and Market which is called Park Fifty Five and its at 55 Cyril Magnin Way.

IRITANI: You said it was at what and Market?

ASAWA: Near Fifth and Market. Fifth and Market, it changes when it gets north of Market it's something else and south of Market it's Fifth and Market. It's one block long. It's called Cyril Magnin Way. And then I have done a large wall at the motor court entrance to the hotel.

IRITANI: Cyril Magnin Way.

ASAWA: And that is called Park Fifty Five which is a hotel. This is commissioned by Larry Chan. His project commissioned me to do that wall at the motor court entrance. It's 14 by 60 feet long. It's a huge wall. I did San Francisco. It's called "San Francisco Past and Present." It's sort of history of San Francisco. You enter Golden Gate Bridge, you go along the waterfront and you end up at the ocean.

IRITANI: Oh-h-h. It sounds great!

ASAWA: Yeah, it is. It's pretty. . .

IRITANI: We'll have to go around and see all these now. Oh, you are so creative and you still continue to be creative. And all you have to do is sit here in studio and look around. . . . My goodness!

ASAWA: I did that one. It's a sample part of a gate.

IRITANI: This green one.

ASAWA: The green one there on the wall.

IRITANI: It's ceramic isn't it?

ASAWA: No, no. It's wood to look like bronze and green. And that's only one section of the. . . and I can show you the drawing I did of a gate I did for a private home.

IRITANI: Uh-huh. Oh, wow! And your great, big heads. Those are magnificent!

ASAWA: I did those in 1982 for the Easter flower show for Macys. I did twelve called San Franciscans. And these are the only ones that are left and then I have some in the country. We have a place in

the country and so I put them because they took so much space.

I put them out there. That's Carol Channing.

IRITANI: Oh, yes it is! Oh, wow! And these are all wires?

ASAWA: Yeah. They're woven in. They're crocheted in wire.

IRITANI: Actually you use a crochet hook?

ASAWA: No, I use my hands because the wire is hard enough that it holds its shape. And then I did these for ten or twelve years, then the ones that branch and look like trees.

IRITANI: Trees.

ASAWA: Yeah. I started in 1962 when a friend of ours brought a desert plant from Death Valley and said, "Here's something for you to draw." So, I tried to draw it, but it was such a tangle that I had to construct it in wire in order to draw it. And then I got the idea that I could use it as a way to work in wire.

IRITANI: And that's the first time you had worked in wire?

ASAWA: No, no. I had worked on the crocheted ones for many years, but, I had never done anything like that one that's on the wall.

IRITANI: That's beautiful.

ASAWA: And out of that I got this idea that I could do it. I continued to work in what I call "tied wire."

IRITANI: Is that mainly your material now?

ASAWA: No, I work in paper and cast bronze. I try. . . . I'm primarily interested in the use of material. I'm not so interested in the

expression of something. But, I'm more interested in what the material can do. And so that's why I keep exploring.

IRITANI: Various materials.

ASAWA: Various materials and I keep thinking of what you have in your kitchen, your egg carton and your milk cartons and by using it I understand that everything has a unit. The principle of something is much more important than the material itself, because if you want a square you can do it in plaster, or I mean you can do it in plastic or you can do it in paper or you can do it in metal or you can. . . . That principle can be used anywhere. If you can work on principles then you don't have to worry about the materials. You can make something happen.

IRITANI: And you've gotten things to happen. And no doubt about it! And the other area of your interest is working with children. And the teaching and the involvement of children in art work. Could you tell us about how and when you started doing that?

ASAWA: Well, I learned at Black Mountain that you have to be a responsible person in your community. You can't be self-serving all your whole life. People can make money or people can make power or something. But, at the end they look at themselves, "what good is all that money?", "what good is all this?" I think it's important that we look at our children as investments. You know? You invest in children or you invest in young people, then you get a great return. Then you get

fresh ideas from them. They have different ideas, different ways of approaching. So that I feel as though the wealth of the nation is in what we leave with the kids. So, I have invested in children because I think that's better than a product.

IRITANI: So, what are you doing? Do you have a special program?

ASAWA: I have a program. I set up a fund about five years ago called the "Ruth Asawa Fund", and I get money and with this money, I hire artists that can teach the children a skill and so right now we have huge project at Alvarado Elementary School.

IRITANI; It's a public school?

ASAWA: Yes, and I think that it's much more important to be an elementary teacher than it is to be an university teacher because it's already too late. It's easier to teach college than it is to teach elementary, because you have all kinds of problems with the young. But, those are the problems we must solve rather than the those of college-age children.

IRITANI: So, with this fund, you have various teachers work?

ASAWA: You have artists or we take our children to the opera, the symphony, the museum. We try to give children exposure. We try to give them an experience. It's all hands on.

IRITANI: How does it work? Do you go out and find the artist, or do they apply?

ASAWA: Well, I don't try to solve anyone's problems. I have had programs where we were in fifty schools and we'd say we served

10,000 children, and we didn't really do much for them. I would rather focus on one school. And build a space that they can work on, so we said build a ceramic studio at one school. So, rather than taking a cart to their class rooms, I would rather have children be in an environment that shows them what it is to be an artist. Then they can make a decision.

IRITANI: So, you have one ceramic class in that whole school and the various teachers bring their students in?

ASAWA: Yes, but, they are also working on a wall. A ceramic wall which is 340 square feet of ceramic mural which involved the whole school, the parents, the teachers. It involved all of them even though in the beginning they didn't really understand the enormity of it, but someday, when they're 40-50 years old, they can see what they did when they were six. And I want that, too.

IRITANI: And that's at Alvarado?

ASAWA: Alvarado. it's just a few blocks away.

IRITANI: And how often do you go yourself?

ASAWA: Well, I was there this morning.

IRITANI: Oh, you were?

ASAWA: I go when I can. I have so many things to do.

IRITANI: I bet.

ASAWA: But, I went and I took some sketch books and I posed for them and they posed for each other. And so in first grade I had a first grade sketch book for them. And then, I have a friend who's a

wood carver. He carves and he shows them how to carve. He has a piece of wood that he got from a ship. It's nice mahogany. It's just a scrap. He taught the children how to make an oval out of it. In it he has drawn a mermaid and he had them carve around the mermaid.

IRITANI: And so, the children themselves are helping to do that. To create that.

ASAWA: Yeah. They actually carve and the artist shows them how.

IRITANI: And all of this at that one school?

ASAWA: This is at one school, because it's impossible to do it all over with limited financing.

IRITANI: Instead of a scatter shot you focus on one.

ASAWA: And hope that by reaching the children and their teachers and families it will spread.

IRITANI: I think we're at the end of this tape, too, so we'll close here.

[End Tape 2, Side B]

[Begin Tape 3, Side A]

IRITANI: We will complete this interview very shortly. I notice on this biographical sketch here that you have earned honorary degrees from a number of places. And been really recognized by a number of groups. I certainly commend you for what you do. Your creativity is wonderful. Just sitting in here, you can feel that, really.

ASAWA: Thank you.

IRITANI: You look back on your life now, you are now seventy what?

ASAWA: Seventy four.

IRITANI: Seventy four.

ASAWA: And I just began to feel my age. At seventy three. Last year several things began to go wrong. In 1985, when I was fifty eight, I had lupus.

IRITANI: Oh-h-h.

ASAWA: I was diagnosed as having lupus. I got very, very sick.

IRITANI: And you still have it then?

ASAWA: I still have it, yes.

IRITANI: But it doesn't bother you?

ASAWA: Well, I was very, very sick in 1984 and then finally in 1985, so many symptoms came together that they decided that I had lupus.

IRITANI: You just knew you were ill, but they didn't recognize it.

ASAWA: They couldn't diagnose it. And finally they're called twelve symptoms. If four come together, any four, then they know that you probably have lupus. And also there's a blood test that shows it, too. So, I got so sick that I was in intensive care for about five weeks. I was very sick. And they used chemo therapy. And so I think it caused some nerve damage in my feet. So, I've had a problem with balance. I can't balance myself very well.

IRITANI: So, you have to be very careful, careful in your movement.

ASAWA: Yes, I have to move slower. I used to just jump up and climb stairs, and jump in, hop into the car, and I can't do those things. And so, I stopped driving. I decided I would not try to drive.

IRITANI: Well, here in the city, you probably have very good bus system.

ASAWA: Good transportation. Yes. So, now I feel my age.

[Laughter]

ASAWA: And everybody says, "Oh, no. You're too young. You're still too young. People live to be a hundred these days."

IRITANI: That's right.

ASAWA: And so, I can't complain.

IRITANI: Just to be careful.

ASAWA: I have to go slow.

IRITANI: But, as far as your creating, you continue to create here. Is this the latest work?

ASAWA: No, no, no. My latest work is what I'm doing for the new DeYoung Museum here. We're having a new DeYoung built here?

IRITANI: Right.

ASAWA: And they have a tower which is going to be an educational tower. The architect is working on a design that starts with a rectangular base and finishes with a triangular roof. And that intrigued me so much. Also I was trying to figure out how I could involve children in this whole campaign, because I think it's so vital to the Bay Area. It's not just San Francisco's problem,

it's a Bay Area problem, re-building the DeYoung. I have a paper model of the tower, and I'm going to make it into. . . see that shape. See right here?

IRITANI: Oh, this down here. Okay.

ASAWA: I proposed to the museum to make a piggy bank so children could be involved in helping with this. We had this model. And they said, "Very beautiful shape." So, that's what I'm involved in right now.

IRITANI: How are you involving the children in that?

ASAWA: Well, we may give each school a bank to raise money for. . .

IRITANI: For the DeYoung Museum. Oh-h.

ASAWA: Or it doesn't have to be a school. It could be a church. It could be anybody who wants to be involved in the DeYoung. It's not a moneymaker. But it's just an involvement for little people. They want to contribute, too.

IRITANI: Focusing their attention on this project.

ASAWA: They could even give a quarter. I mean if they even give a quarter they will still feel that they have done something for the museum. That's how the Japanese Pagoda was started by Japanese children in Japan. I think they did the Statue of Liberty that way in some ways, too. So, it's just a nice gesture of being involved.

IRITANI: So, do the students or the schools already have them?

ASAWA: No, no. We're just working on it right now. And we're going to have it built. . . it's going to be ceramic. [Inaudible].

IRITANI: Very good. So, all these things that you have in your studio here, you're not working on all these. I see feet over here. And masks over here. And I'm not sure what you call these hanging. . . they're like baskets. . .

ASAWA: I just call them all sculptures.

IRITANI: Oh, I like that with two or three pieces right inside.

ASAWA: Inside. This one here is a continuous one from the bottom it goes inside and outside and it goes to the next one. A similar thing happens in this piece so that surface is continuous all the way to the bottom. And those are the things that intrigued me. [Many of our design problems at Black Mountain were seemingly insoluble, but with enough study the solution seemed too simple for words. They required many trials and many errors to solve.]

IRITANI: It's solving puzzles.

ASAWA: Yes, I have one thing that. . . you know, the Chinese knot? You know the Chinese button? A Chinese friend, Mae Lee's mother, taught us how to make it. I'll show you one upstairs.

IRITANI: No, I've seen those. I guess they call them frogs or something.

ASAWA: Frogs. That intrigues me and things like that make me happy.

IRITANI: In other words, it's endless for you. Because there's going to be something else intriguing.

ASAWA: There's something else. Life is not. . . .

IRITANI: It's not static. Your life is not static. You don't just stay in one place.

ASAWA: It doesn't matter what it is. Stand still too long and your life will be ended. It's like an endless rope, you know.

IRITANI: Right. Well, I think that's wonderful. And some of these things are incomplete, yet?

ASAWA: Oh, they're always incomplete. Like this? You make something like this out of scraps of paper. But it's intriguing. It's like the Chinese frog.

IRITANI: That you try to figure out.

ASAWA: I have to learn how long it's going to be, the width of it. You can't be too short or too long or wide.

IRITANI: Oh, to be so creative. I have enjoyed this afternoon by taking a lot of your time here.

ASAWA: I'm going to show you the wall of faces I have, if you will come out.

IRITANI: Any additional thought you have of what you've done or who you are?

ASAWA: I don't know who I am. [chuckle]

IRITANI: Well, you've shown us you are a very creative, thoughtful, ingenious person. Really. I'm just. . .

ASAWA: But, I'm not a politician.

[Laughter]

IRITANI: No, you're right. No, you work for the good of the community, that's what you do.

ASAWA: You are as strong as the weakest link, aren't you?

IRITANI: Well, I hope your health. . . you look very good.

ASAWA: Thanks.

IRITANI: Yeah, you look very good.

ASAWA: I'm just a little wobbly.

IRITANI: Just be careful, and thank you so much Ruth.

ASAWA: You're welcome.

IRITANI: Thank you for letting me take this much time. This is the end of the interview.

[End of interview]

NAMES LIST

Florin Japanese American Citizens League
 Oral History Project
 California Civil Liberties Public education Program Grant

INTERVIEWEE Ruth Asawa Lanier
 INTERVIEWER Joanne Iritani
 COOPERATING INSTITUTION Oral History Program
 California State University, Sacramento, CA

NAME	IDENTIFICATION	SOURCE OF VERIFICATION	PAGE INTRODUCED
Umakichi Asawa	father	Ruth Asawa Lanier	2
Haru Yasuda	mother	Ruth Asawa Lanier	2
Asano Tagumi family	father's samurai background	Ruth Asawa Lanier	2
Sutton family	landlord	Ruth Asawa Lanier	5
William Albert Lanier	husband	Ruth Asawa Lanier	7
Lois Masako Shishido	eldest sister	Ruth Asawa Lanier	7
George Kenjie Asawa	brother	Ruth Asawa Lanier	7
Chiyo Knewbow	sister	Ruth Asawa Lanier	7
Bill Teruo Asawa	brother	Ruth Asawa Lanier	8
Nancy Kimiko Devadas	sister	Ruth Asawa Lanier	8
Janet Tomiko Davis	sister	Ruth Asawa Lanier	8
Kathleen Gregory	elementary school teacher	Ruth Asawa Lanier	19
Fredrika Moore	modern dance teacher	Ruth Asawa Lanier	21
Kanda sensei	Japanese language school teacher	Ruth Asawa Lanier	23
Hirohito	Emperor of Japan	Ruth Asawa Lanier	25
Mr. Takeuchi	in Federal Detention with father	Ruth Asawa Lanier	28
Tom Okamoto	art teacher in Santa Anita	Ruth Asawa Lanier	33
Ben Tanaka	art teacher in Santa Anita	Ruth Asawa Lanier	33

NAME	IDENTIFICATION	SOURCE OF VERIFICATION	PAGE INTRODUCED
Chris Ishii	art teacher in Santa Anita	Ruth Asawa Lanier	33
Chuckie Watanabe	a friend in Santa Anita	Ruth Asawa Lanier	34
Pearl Johnston	teacher in Rohwer	Ruth Asawa Lanier	35
Merce Cuningham	at Black Mountain College	Ruth Asawa Lanier	41
Martha Graham	a famous dance troupe	Ruth Asawa Lanier	41
John Cage	at Black Mountain College	Ruth Asawa Lanier	41
Willem de Kooning	at Black Mountain College	Ruth Asawa Lanier	41
Robert Rauschenberg	at Black Mountain College	Ruth Asawa Lanier	42
Kneedler Fauchere	design company	Ruth Asawa Lanier	43
Charles Eames	artist/designer	Ruth Asawa Lanier	43
Francis Xavier	son	Ruth Asawa Lanier	46
Gerry Lanier	wife of Xavier	Ruth Asawa Lanier	46
Xavier Lanier, Jr.	son of Xavier & Gerry	Ruth Asawa Lanier	46
Christopher Lanier	son of Xavier & Gerry	Ruth Asawa Lanier	46
Aiko Lanier Cuneo	daughter	Ruth Asawa Lanier	46
Larry Cuneo	husband of Aiko	Ruth Asawa Lanier	46
Ken Cuneo	son of Larry & Aiko	Ruth Asawa Lanier	46
Carrie Cuneo	wife of Ken	Ruth Asawa Lanier	46
Hudson Cuneo	son of Larry & Aiko	Ruth Asawa Lanier	48
Hudson Lanier	son	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Terry Carr Lanier	wife of Hudson Lanier	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Max Lanier	son of Hudson & Terry	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Lillie Lanier	daughter of Hudson & Terry	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Adam Lanier	son	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Laurie Lanier Weverka	daughter	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Peter Weverka	husband of Laurie	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47

NAME	IDENTIFICATION	SOURCE OF VERIFICATION	PAGE INTRODUCED
Aiko Sophia	daughter of Laurie	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Henry Gabriel Weverka	son of Laurie	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Paul Lanier	son	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Sandra Halliday Lanier	wife of Paul	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Emma Lanier	daughter of Paul & Sandra	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
William Lanier	son of Paul & Sandra	Ruth Asawa Lanier	47
Cyril Magnin	local businessman	Ruth Asawa Lanier	49
Larry Chan	commissioned art work	Ruth Asawa Lanier	50
Carol Channing	actress featured in art work	Ruth Asawa Lanier	51
May Lee	a friend	Ruth Asawa Lanier	59